

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Neal: I'm [Neal Matti 00:00:02], and at the time of blizzard of '49. I was twenty one years old. I was working on a ranch four miles north of Crawford, Nebraska.

On New Year's Day, the family went to another ranch, one of the daughter's and her husband lived there. We had New Year's dinner. Pete [Raymond 00:00:22], the grandfather, said, "This weather reader, it got up to about sixty degrees on New Year's Day, on the first of January." He said, "You better look out." I don't remember now if the storm started that night or the next day or night, but he knew what he was talking about. Of course, he was crippled up like I am now.

Anyway, we got held up in that house. Thank goodness they had a Delco-Light and a wind charger. We had electricity, that's before the [RIA 00:00:54] come in. They ground their own wheat for bread and baked it, always did their own bread baking anyway, and things like that. We got along fine. Their well, of course, kept running.

When that thing hit, the next morning we got up, and man, it was a-howling and a-snowing, and the front door, couldn't move it. We could get out the backdoor. There was two other doors, one out of the basement, and one out of the backdoor. They were facing the Northwest, and the wind would blow and keep them clean, but if it wouldn't have been for that, we would have been in tough shape.

After about the, it's probably the second day in the storm, the phone rang, and it's a miracle the phone never quit. Ours didn't, or theirs, I was just an employee there. A guy lived up in [inaudible 00:01:54] about ten miles north called me and said, "My dad's down there in a little shack about a half mile west of our branch [00:02:00] buildings, on the highway, but we can't get a hold of him. Can you go down and check on him?" He was a widower [inaudible 00:02:08]. Jim and I, that's my boss, we suited up tied a rag to put around our face, and headed off to the West, right into that storm. This pasture was forty acres wide and eighty acres long, and it ended up from a windbreak right down to the highway. We got across the fence and into it, and I don't think we'd gone half way down there, and we were lost. We couldn't see anything. You could see about that far. You could see your feet, and that's about it. The snow was a-blowing just something terrible.

We just kept on going, and finally we run into a fence. Then we got oriented, so we found out where we were, so we got down, checked on the old man. "Ah, I'm fine! I got fuel, wood for my stove, and we got water." Going back, we followed

the fence around until we got the windbreak, and then we knew we were right there at the house.

That was my first experience in something like that. I was born and raised in Wisconsin. We had storms, but nothing like that, and lots of wet snow, and it was cold. That's why I left Wisconsin.

They raised registered Hereford for cattle, bulls. They had about a hundred head of cows, and we had, I think, six bulls in a lean-to. It was an opened-setted barn, is what it was, probably seven foot high and about thirty, forty foot wide. We'd tie them to the manger, and they had a feed box for each one, because we fed them for show, going to sell them for the breeding stock. They'd get so much grain a day and so much hay, and then we'd take them out to the round-up coral. It had a water tank, and let them [00:04:00] drink.

About the second or third day, I forget now, somehow the wind let up or what, but we got out and went down there. These poor bulls, the wind kept blowing the snow in evidently, and they just kept packing it down and packing it down. When we got there, there wasn't about an inch between their back and the roof of the building. They were all right, but man, I never saw anything like it. Most of the cattle were in a big, straw shed just off away from the buildings a ways, and there was room for most of them to get in there in the shelter, for the ones that couldn't get in. We didn't lose any cattle. We did lose on later, though, about a month later. There was pond where they would drink, and we'd go down and chop the ice out. One of them got out on the ice, and got his leg splayed out and hurt ... I suppose he broke his pelvis or something. That's the only cow they lost, but it was something else.

I never shoveled so much snow in all my life! I'd use a number fourteen scoop shovel, and I'd shovel wheat with that, too. I was big and strong, twenty-one. The other people would use a number four scoop for a little better, but you know how young guys are, bigger and stronger and show off a little bit. We shoveled. The trouble was, you'd shovel it out, go to bed, wake up, it's all blowed back in. You'd start all over again. Pete, the grandfather, was ill, and he had to have medicine. About probably the third day, Jim, my boss, his son, saddled up the horse, put his sack on his saddle behind him, the road is only four miles into Crawford. [00:06:00] He can ride across the top of the fences and everything else, and got the medicine, and get a sack full of groceries and little odds and ends. It was, I think the twelfth of March before we got a car out of the garage that we could drive to town peaceably. They'd go in with the tractor or the horse.

The National Guard come in, plow us out, just same next day. It blowed, plow us out, or else maybe it would be two or three days before they'd get back. We

could see planes flying. They were dropping hay to people that had cattle out on the prairie. It was something else. The Northwestern Railroad ran from, well I don't know, Eastern Nebraska to Chadron, to Crawford, onto Harrison, to Lusk, and on to Casper. Of course that's all closed off now. There's a lot of cuts between Chadron and Crawford. The highway's the same way, and they were, some of them were pretty tall. They ten, twelve foot high. They would blow full, plum full. Then they come in, and they couldn't blow it out with a big v-plow on a ... They were steam engines then. They couldn't go in and get her, so they went and found a great big rotary, and it was a big one, mounted it in front of the steam engine. They'd get it, them cuts, and there'd be cattle in there, froze solid! It'd tear up their big rotaries, so they took her back to shed and patch it up. By the time they come back, they'd have to start all over again!

I don't know how long it was before they got a train in there, but it was a long time. Now the railroad quit at Crawford. That's the end of the line there.

Speaker 2: When you went out in the midst of the storm to check up on this old guy, what were you wearing for clothing? How ... [00:08:00]

Neal: We had jeans and maybe, probably two pair of jeans, and long underwear, and probably a coat and a sweater. Didn't have slicker suits then, never even heard of them until they got the wealthy in. Big stocking cap was over your ears, and a scarf around your face so you could see and still breathe. Of course, then your scarf could get wet from condensation, and it'd freeze. It was just a mess. You can't work that way with that kind of garb on! You'd start sweating, and then you freeze. We would shovel snow, and then we'd shovel some more snow.

I left Wisconsin summer of '48 and come out here for the harvest. Got to Crawford and got a job with a guy, well he was the brother of the guy I was working for now. I'm hauling grain for him. I had two guys with me, and they wanted to go back to Eastern Wisconsin. They got homesick, so I sold them my little Model A coup, and they left. I'd worked for Elmer, and then when I went to work for Jim was at the other brother, where I was staying. Elmer told me, he said, "Well, we have open winters quite often. We get into the field sometimes late in February." I said, "Well back in Wisconsin, we're getting in, in April, we're lucky." I said, "This sounds like it ... I like the country, the dry ..." I really did like it, so I stayed.

In the middle of that blizzard, that night I picked up the phone, and I called Elmer. He lived about two miles away, and I says, "Is this what you mean by an open winter?" His wife is still alive down in home, down by Scott's Bluff, and [00:10:00] she said, "He never forgot that as long as, until he died," twenty or thirty years later. That was the worst storm I guess they'd ever had, in their lifetime, anyway. I think 1888 was a bad one [inaudible 00:10:19] nobody living

there. That's really all I can remember right now. The World Herald put out these papers. When the train finally did get through, we got mail, because the train from Burlington. They had better ... For [sale 00:10:39], they didn't have any cuts to go through, and so the Burlington come in. They cross at Crawford, the Burlington and the Northwestern.

Speaker 2: Could you describe these bulls again? They were inside of a barn-like structure? Was it open on one end?

Neal: Yeah, it was just like an open barn. They get air this way, and of course it wasn't tight. There's a lot of cracks in it. They were Hereford bulls, registered. We would teach them, because you have to have them ... You can control them with a rope halter and a rope so you can take them in the sale barn, and they won't run over everybody! That's why we'd keep them tied up, lead them out there to water, get them used to people and stuff like that.

Speaker 2: The snow started, and they were tied up as the snow started?

Neal: Oh yeah, they were tied up. The snow would just blow in, and they would just keep building it up under their feet, and they'd pack it down. It was just nothing but ice, then.

Speaker 2: The ropes were long enough-

Neal: Oh yeah. The only reason you'd tie them, if you see them loose in a barn like that, they'll start fighting, then you lost all the fat in them, the shine you got on them.

Speaker 2: Their back were up against the ceiling?

Neal: Right at it. They still had room to maneuver [00:12:00], but not much more. It was close, it really was. It couldn't believe it! We'd go ... You're looking up at a bull's head, looking down at you.

Speaker 2: How'd you get them down?

Neal: Oh you just untie them.

Speaker 2: They just kind of-

Neal: Yeah. Back them off, lead them back out of there. I don't know what we did with them then.

Speaker 2: I heard some folks, that same thing happened to them with sheep in their barn. This one couple cut a hole in the roof of their barn to get them out that way.

Neal: Is that right?

Speaker 2: [crosstalk 00:12:31] drift.

Neal: Well I don't know. They never had any sheep.

Speaker 2: Was the '49-er the worst winter you've ever been in?

Neal: Oh by far. We've had some storms here since I was in Gillette. I was over in Philip, South Dakota, on a little rig, to run the drill [inaudible 00:12:51] for Halliburton Services. It had rained over there and got terrible, terrible muddy, and they said there was a storm coming, so I left the rig, and got into Philip, and got a room in the hotel downtown. That was it. The boss came in, and they couldn't leave town. There wasn't enough rooms. They were sleeping on the floor, they was on the cot, and everything else. I was there for, I think, two days on that storm. I couldn't even call back here to Gillette. The electricity was off. They run out of water. We was living in a new house. The vents up in part of the roof, well they started roughing it... The first thing my wife noticed, the water was dripping down in the bedroom on our bed. Two of the people that built them lived just right close, and she called one, and he come over and went up, and there was a lot of snow in there. They shoveled it into buckets and handed it down, and then put a board over that so it couldn't blow in anymore.

When I got back three days later, it was still just one way [00:14:00] traffic on the North-South road to my house. Snow was, I guess they got about thirty inches, or something like that.

Speaker 2: Still, the '49-er was worse.

Neal: Well they had so much more wind. This wasn't so bad. I wasn't here, of course, but my wife described it after that. As soon as the storm warning went up, she filled the bathtub with water. She ain't going to run out of water no more! The kids had a ball. They could go out and go up ... Down there in Crawford, we had a chicken coop and then a garage, and the snow would blow over. It was right level with the eaves on the garage, and it was a pretty tall garage, and right out into the door yard. Man, oh man.

Speaker 2: Do you recall what it was like when everything started thawing that spring in the Crawford area?

Neal: No. I don't think it caused us any problems where we were. I don't recall any at all. I'm surprised now, when I think about it, that ... Of course that was pretty good range, kind of sandy country. It will drink a lot of water. I'm not sure that the ground was froze. Probably wasn't before it stormed. That was what I'd guess, and a lot of that would go down.

Speaker 2: You had mentioned it was so warm-

Neal: Yeah, that was. I'd never heard of such a thing. On the first of January, sixty degrees in Wisconsin. You don't even dream about that! I never regretted leaving Wisconsin. It's damp, and it's cold back there, and it's hot. When we was kids, we would always work in the woods, cutting either a fence post or it's ties [00:16:00]. No matter how much snow, we had to do it. That made our living. Sometimes you'd open the kitchen door on a winter day, and it was quiet, as still as could be, and you'd hear "Crack!" Just like a Howitzer. The trees are freezing. The sap in the trees are freezing. When it was that cold, it's too cold for this old boy to live there. I'll tell you that!

Speaker 2: What were your responsibilities at this ranch, then, that you were working at when you were twenty-one?

Neal: Feed the cattle in the wintertime.

Speaker 2: You were a cowboy?

Neal: No. Just feeding the cattle. We had a team of horses and a wagon, we'd load up a load of hay, loose hay, and go out and feed it, get back, and if that got something to fix, fix it, or if not. In the summer time, they did some farming, wheat and hay. Of course, they cut hay, and they got a baler. I would ride behind the baler, and that flatbed wagon tied to the baler. I'd feed them, stack them up about five high, and somebody else would haul them into the stack yard. Somebody would make a stack out of them, but I was the only one in the whole family that could do that hard of work, follow that baler, because I was big and young. They all had bad backs and bad hearts and stuff like that.

Speaker 2: They had plenty of hay for when this blizzard set in?

Neal: Oh yeah. They had a summer pasture, eighteen miles north toward, or around Orella, which is in Sioux county, the next county over. They'd take cattle up there every spring, bring them back every fall. I got to help drive them. [00:18:00] They follow the railroad through, the highway paralleled it. Then you get up there. You go up there and fix fence and stuff like that. You always find something to do.

Speaker 2: You've never experienced a worse winter storm then-

Neal: Nope. Not even close, nothing I've been in. In fact, I don't know if there was many storms worse than that in this century. During the last century, I mean, not this century. It was bad. A lot of people lost an awful lot of livestock, sheep especially, but the cattle would just drift with the storm, get to a fence or something. They'd pile up and smother, but we were very fortunate.

Excuse me, the grandfather came from Denmark as a boy in about 1880 or something like that, maybe a little before that. He learned, he worked for the LAJ Ranch at Newcastle for several years and learned how to ranch, so he knew how to do these things. He was a pretty shrewd old man. I married his daughter, finally, many years later, so many years later. That's about my story, I guess, unless you got something else you want to ask?

[inaudible 00:19:37] hadn't have got the National Guard or whoever, the bulldozers and the airplanes. They plowed the county roads out several times, many, quite a few times. Quite an experience. It really was. Thank you.

Speaker 2: Thanks so much. [00:20:00] Okay, let's wrap this.